The Legend

STALWART ACTOR SIVAJI GANESAN PASSED AWAY ON JULY 21 IN CHENNAI

LATA MANGESHKAR REMEMBERS HER *RAAKHI* BROTHER

He wasn't just my *raakhi* brother. He loved my entire family, especially my mother.

My mind travels back several decades. In the 1960s, many of my songs would be recorded in Chennai. So quite often I'd record at the Gemini or AVM studios. He'd tell his driver to pick up my luggage and promptly bring me home. He insisted that I should stay with his family.

In the morning, he'd bathe, do his *puja* and come with ash smeared on his forehead to see me in the guest room. He'd say, *"Kya re,* Lata, *abhi tak soya hai?"*

Whenever I stayed in his house, before he went off shooting, he'd leave instructions about which chutney should be served with the *dosa.* The minute he returned, he'd inquire about me.

I don't recall my first meeting with him. But I do remember once Asha, Meena, Usha, Hridyanath and I were in Chennai. We were keen to travel around, visit the Meenakshi temple and Rameshwaram. Sivaji *saab* took control. He sent his manager, three other persons, two cars and his personal driver Shiva with us.Thanks to

AN ERA ENDS

He was a living legend, a virtual encyclopedia of acting. The late Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, C.N. Annadurai, once said that if a Hollywood star tried hard enough, he could probably measure up to him!

Villupuram Chinniah Ganesan, better known as 'Sivaji' Ganesan, passed away on July 21, around 7.30 p.m.

He was born on October 1, 1927. His father Chinniah Pillai was a nationalist who was arrested during the freedom struggle. Sivaji was born the day his father was arrested. The son saw his father for the first time only when he was four.

When he was seven, a travelling drama troupe staged ***Veera Pandiya Kattabomman*** in Villupuram. Local lads were recruited to dress up as British soldiers for the performance. Sivaji Ganesan was one of them. When his father came to know of this, he thrashed him black-and-blue. How could the son of a nationalist, play the role of a Britisher? Years later, Sivaji played the title role of Kattabomman, one of his most cherished performances.

On being beaten up by his father, Sivaji ran away from home to join the Yadharatham Ponnuswamy drama unit. He started off playing female roles but when frustration set in, he joined the Srirangam Transport Company as a mechanic.

He returned to acting when C.N. Annadurai, the political force of 1940s, asked Ganesan to play the role of Sivaji in the play scripted by him. The actor was called Sivaji thereafter.

In 1952, the 25-year-old Sivaji played his first lead role in ***Parasakthi*** and was acclaimed for Karunanidhi's rhetorical anti-Brahmin dialogue.

With a couple of more hits under his belt, Sivaji made a pilgrimage to Tirupathi to thank the Lord of the Seven Hills for his success. This was contradictory to the atheistic ideology of the DMK party. Sivaji was publicly jeered and humiliated. Enraged, he quit the party.

By 1955, Sivaji was an admirer of Kamaraj. Donning *khadi*, he joined the Congress, to which he remained affiliated till the 1980s. He tried to float a new party but met with little success and therefore, quit politics.

In his 49-year career, Sivaji acted in over 300 films, playing the lead in 285 of them.

In 1966, he was awarded the Padma Shree and in 1984, the Padma Bhushan. In 1983 he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha.

In 1995, Sivaji was honoured by France with the title of 'Chevalier'. In 1996, he received the Dadasaheb Phalke Award.

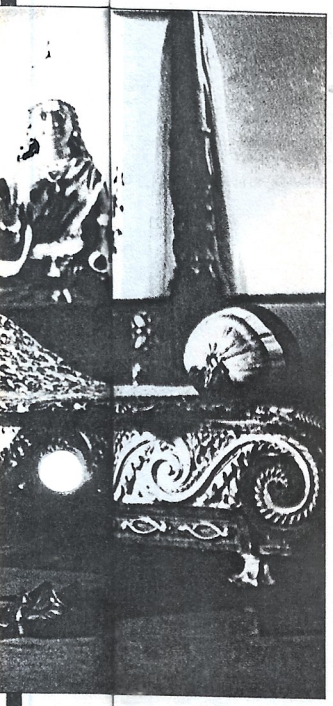
For ***Veera Pandiya Kattabomman***, Sivaji Ganesan had won the Best Actor Award at the Afro-Asian film festival in Cairo in 1960.

Among the many films he will be rememberd for are ***Parasakthi, Kappalottiya Thamizhan, Veera Pandiya Kattabomman, Pasamalar, Gowravam, Uthamaputhran, Thangapadakkam, Navarathri, Deiva Magan, Mudhal Mariyadhai*** and ***Thevar Magan.***

During the shoot of his first film ***Parasakthi***, a sound engineer had commented that the actor was opening his mouth like a fish while delivering dialogue. Director Krishnan had consoled him by assuring him that his dialogue delivery would become legendary some day... and it did.

S. Thangadurai

WE SPOKE THE language of love. He knew enough Hindi to communicate his affection



him, we travelled in great comfort. After this, we became really thick friends. He invited us home to dinner and screened one of his new Tamil films for us. After another 10-12 days of his overwhelming hospitality we returned to Mumbai. It was an unforgettable experience.

Ever since he had a portion of his home demolished, I had to stay in a hotel in Chennai. But a visit and meals at his place were a must. Though he hadn't been keeping well for quite some time, he would either come personally or send his daughter to bring me home. My favourite dishes would be ready, his entire family dotes on me.

There was a time when Sivaji *saab* used to visit Mumbai to stage his plays. My mother noticed that his performances were physically strenuous. So, before every show, my mother would send him soup.

Once he came to Mumbai *en route* to the US. My mother took him to her *puja* room, performed his *aarti*, then offered him *prasad* and a gold chain which he promptly wore around his neck. When he returned from the US, he came straight to our house. That was his first trip to the US.

Unfailingly, every Diwali he would send clothes for every member of the Mangeshkar family. Not once did he miss this ritual. I was never surprised by his generosity because I was his sister. Even if I forgot to send him a *rakhi*, he'd never forget his Diwali presents.

As artistes, we both admired each other's work. I thought him awesome in all his Tamil films which I've seen. He would send prints of his films to Mumbai, specially for me. The last film I saw of his was *Thevar Magan*. Till the end, he was a brilliant actor.

The last time I met him was a couple of years ago, when we both won awards in

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Hyderabad. He came to my room and said, "I'm ready. But you take so long. That's because you don't wake up early."

Asha and I went to Chennai together when his mother passed away. While his father lived in a village, his mother used to live with him. She was a goddess to the entire household. All the three brothers—Sivaji *saab's* elder brother, Sivaji and his younger brother—lived together under the same roof.

The death of his younger brother shattered Sivaji *saab*. He was inconsolable. The brother would look after all his professional interests. Later, Sivaji *saab's* son Ramu took over. The younger son, Prabhu, is an actor like his father. Sivaji *saab* also has two daughters, both were married at an early age. He was a very orthodox man just like my father. Sivaji *saab* would keep berating my sister Meena until her daughter Rachna was married. He believed in the joint-family system.

What language did we speak in? The language of love. He knew enough Hindi to communicate his affection. There has never been a star like him in the South. And still he was such an epitome of humility.

Once when I was at his home, I expressed admiration for the *nauratna* necklace his wife was wearing. He immediately told his Kamala Amma to take it off and give it to me. It's one of my favourite pieces of jewellery, I wear it quite often. But after that incident I was cautious not to admire anything in his house.

WHEN I ADMIRED the *nauratna* necklace his wife was wearing, he told "Kamala Amma" to give it to me

When there was a celebration for my silver jubilee year in the film industry, he especially came to Mumbai to present me with a Saraswati idol, a gold chain and a garland of flowers that he had brought all the way from Chennai. *Bahut pyar karte the.*

I'll always regret the fact that I couldn't meet him before he passed away. I recorded a song for Ilaiyaraja on May 17 in Mumbai. I was supposed to go to Chennai for the recording. But I couldn't because of ill health. When Raja (Ilaiyaraja) was here, I'd asked about Sivaji *saab's* health. Raja had said, "No, he's not well. You must go and see him because you might not get another chance. But I had to leave for London that very night. I told my sister Meena that we would visit Sivaji *saab* when we returned from London.

He had called me up in London when I had received the Bharat Ratna. He said. "Congratulations. *Kya re* Lata, *kya kar raha hai tu?*" When I'd asked about his health, he'd said, *"Chalta hai, kab jayega, pataa nahin."* He knew his end was near.

Just two days before his death, my nephew Yogesh and I were trying Sivaji *saab's* number. We couldn't get through. I think he was hospitalised that evening. When I heard about his death, something inside me died too.

Whenever he came to Mumbai he would ask me to sing my Marathi devotional *Ghanshyam sundara.*

He was the lion of Tamil cinema. Like Uttam Kumar was in Bengali cinema. I can never forget our times together. We never tom-tommed our closeness. But we were really close.

...as told to Subhash K. Jha